

# OpenTheo

## Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President with Allen Guelzo

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### Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

It's a special day at LBE as Kevin interviews his first returning guest, the esteemed historian Dr. Allen Guelzo of Princeton University. Find out how Dr. Guelzo moved from being an Edwards scholar to being a Lincoln scholar (and how Edward's treatise on the will still permeates much of what Guelzo has written about Lincoln). Listen in as Kevin and Allen talk about whether Lincoln was a Christian, what made Lincoln great, and what Lincoln has to teach us today.

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### Transcript

[music] Greetings and salutations. Welcome back to Life and Books and Everything. I'm

Kevin DeYoung and I'm going to introduce my guest, our first returning visitor, hopefully not victim, but returning visitor to LBE for an interview.

And that is Dr. Allen Guelzo. So we're going to talk about his book on Abraham Lincoln. First, I want to thank Crossway for sponsoring LBE and mention this week Sinclair Ferguson.

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Dr. Gelso, glad to have you with us for enduring many technological trials and tribulations. Thank you for taking time to be here again. Most of the trials tribulations are a product of my own techno incompetence.

Well, I will tell you, we have experts here helping and almost every time we record this, something goes wrong. So many of us are dealing with the same thing. Thank you so much for being here.

And last time, a year or two ago, we talked about your new biography then on Robert E. Lee. So I'm just curious, what sort of feedback have you gotten on that? How has the book done? What has been the reception? It seems like it's been positively received. Well, surprisingly so, given the environment that Robert E. Lee seems to inhabit these days in public opinion, most of the evaluations that I have seen have been surprisingly positive.

I cannot say that I spend a lot of time reading reviews of my own books. I think there are some people who do that. Yeah, no, well done.

Usually, I only read a review of someone insists on thrusting it in front of me and making me read it. Usually by the time the reviews come out, one of two things is true. A, it's too late to do anything about it.

So what's the point? And B, I've usually moved on to the next book, and in fact, that's the case here as well. I'm actually in the midst of the scene. The last time I checked, I think it was three different book projects.

Yeah, what are you working on? Can you let us in on the secret? Right now, I'm bringing to a conclusion the writing of a new Lincoln book to be entitled "Our Ancient Faith, Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln and American Democracy." And it's a somewhat shorter book, but it's a walk-through, you might say, of Lincoln's ideas on what

democracy is, means, and should be. I'm then working on a little volume called "The Gettysburg Reader." That may not be its final title, but it'll be something of a companion volume to the history of the Battle of Gettysburg that I wrote in 2013.

It'll be an anthology of primary sources so that someone, for instance, who is visiting the battlefield could take this around with them and be able from place to place, read what the participants in the battle were actually describing on the days in 1863. And then I'm also in the midst of completing the second volume of a two-volume survey of Western civilization, which I'm writing in conjunction with my longtime friend and associate, James Hankins of Harvard. And there's probably another book proposal waiting to squirm around in the computer.

So that's amazing. So just for our listeners, if you, if just to remind you, Dr. Gelso is now, he's been at many different places, but currently senior research scholar in the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University, Director of the Initiative on Politics and Statements, States Minship for Princeton's James Madison Program in American ideals and institutions. How have you found your time at Princeton? Busy.

Busy. How has it, are you teaching classes or is it largely now the opportunity to research and write? Well, I am teaching each semester, usually one course or one seminar. I have been doing my standard Lincoln course.

I've also done a seminar on constitutional and legal issues in the Civil War, in which Lincoln obviously plays a significant role. I have just finished this semester doing a first year seminar entitled Contours of American Thought, which is something of a survey of American intellectual history, and in which I basically begin with 17th century Harvard and the Purisons, move through Jonathan Edwards. I do stop and tip the hat to John Witherspoon.

Thank you. Yes. And we move from there all the way up to approximately the 1990s.

If I moved beyond that, I'd be doing current events instead of history. That's right. To any of our listeners here, let me just commend to you to listen to any of the great courses that you can get from Dr. Gelso.

You can now get them on Audible if you have an Audible subscription. So I've listened to, I don't know if I've listened to all of them, all of them that I can find and some of them twice. I just listened to your Lincoln one again, and don't mean to embarrass Alan, but he's a fantastic lecturer.

When you lecture, because I teach a course at the seminary, so I lecture, are you reading notes? Are you reading a manuscript? It comes across, nary a word out of place. What are you doing for the actual presentation of your lectures? With the teaching company series, I'm reading from a teleprompter. Oh, okay.

I write it all out. I script everything because I don't want to take chances with my tendency to wander off topic. You have like 28 minutes in episode.

That's it. It's going to come in at exactly that, or it's not going to happen at all. So I script everything, and then it's put up on the teleprompter, and I'm able to read it from the teleprompter.

I hope in the process that what I read sounds at least a little bit like someone having an interesting discussion. It does. It does.

It doesn't sound like someone reading a manuscript. Well, that's my aim. I try to write with the voice in view, so to speak, and then to read so that people can hear.

Well, it's very well done. So go listen to any of them. There's intellectual history, American history, Lincoln, and that's what we're going to talk about today.

I read the first edition when this came out years ago, published by Erdmans, Abraham Lincoln, Redeemer President, and now a second edition updated and revised with a new preface. I want to talk about the preface to start, because many times a new book with a new preface is skippable material, but you have some interesting personal vignettes, if you don't mind me asking about. First, you start.

The preface says, Abraham Lincoln, Redeemer President, was not a book I had planned to write. So you talk about your dissertation, way back when, was on Jonathan Edwards and the problem of free will. How did you move from being an Edward scholar to a Lincoln scholar? Well, there were probably two things that pushed me in that direction, and it was a push.

I had written my dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania on Jonathan Edwards, and I thought for a very long time that was where I was going to camp out. I've always found Edwards to be a source of tremendous interest, and especially his 1754 treatise on freedom of the will, probably the most significant piece of American philosophical writing in the 18th or the 19th century. And I know that does, yes, can't.

Witherspoon's lectures on moral philosophy. No, no. He was a synthesizer.

He was not the depth of thinker that Edwards was on the issues. Well, that's where I thought I was going to be bestowing my attention. I set out when I finished the dissertation to write what I thought was going to be a second volume to that dissertation.

The dissertation was published in 1989 under the title "Edwards on the Will," but it covered the ground from 1754 up to the 1850s and the commentary on Edwards and the controversies that followed him. And I thought, well, let's take another hundred years into view and write a companion volume that'll talk about this problem of free will and

determinism in American philosophy for that next ensuing century. I knew a few things about Abraham Lincoln.

I knew that he often talked about being a fatalist, that he had grown up in a Calvinist environment at home. And I thought it would be tremendously clever of me to give Lincoln a walk-on part in this follow-up volume. So I wrote a paper on Lincoln and his Doctrine of Necessity, and it was received well, and that was when I was approached by Erdmans, would I be interested in contributing a volume on Lincoln's religious life? And as you know from reading the new preface, the first thing I did was to say no.

Right. I had seen, I was aware of a lot of books on Lincoln and religion, which had kind of sunk into the swamp. They were either not terribly well done.

There were people trying to make claims about Lincoln belonging to whatever persuasion they were persuaded of, or else they were superficial. And I thought I really don't want to join that tribe. But Erdmans came back to me and said, well, we'd like you to do this.

And finally, I made a deal. I said, all right, look, I don't want to write a book about Lincoln's religion, but suppose I'm not going to write a book about Lincoln's religion, but suppose I write an intellectual biography of Lincoln that will include religion. Would you be agreeable to that? They said, yes, that was what became the book.

The book did extremely well. And Kevin, to tell you the truth, I'd never gotten back to that. That's all volume on pre-willing determinism.

Well, that's all right. There may be a bigger audience for Abraham Lincoln books. Well, I rather think so, and I don't say any of that in *Despite* of my friends in the Edwards shop.

But yes, it is a smaller fraternity. And I have found many wonderful friends too among Lincoln scholars whose willingness to share and swap and invest in each other is in some ways a remarkable reflection of the man himself. So I very much enjoy being a Lincolnian, but I say that with the warning that there is always a very significant chunk of me, which will remain in a Jonathan Edwards person.

In fact, one other project I'm working on, I'm not giving away any state secrets, but one other project I'm working on is to publish an edition of the diary kept by Samuel Hopkins during 1741 to 1743 when he was operating in the context of the revivals into England and where he was in and out of the Edwards household and very much saw himself as a disciple of Edwards. The original of Hopkins manuscript is in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and I and one of my former students, Donald Soholster, are working on preparing to get these extracts from Hopkins' diary into print. Probably, I don't know that there's enough there to make it a freestanding volume, but we may be able to at least publish some sections of Hopkins' diary, his journal, in a significant scholarly quarterly.

Oh, that would be excellent. So there's still one finger. There's still something yet, a rubber in the Edwards camp, but I want to follow up on something and you just hinted at it and you say this in the preface that you've been a part of several historical interest groups, civil war, Edwards, even Episcopal Church history, and you say that many of them were icy, defensive, protective of their turf, but lincolnians were different, without throwing anybody under the bus unless you want to.

No, no. What was that experience? And do you think that's general? Which one is more generally true of academicians, do you think? I think the iciness is probably more academic turf. One specialty is, you might say, the coinage of the realm, someone who can be an expert, even if it's about a very specific type of person, if it's about a very small island and a very small lake in a very small country.

Right. Still, being able to be the reigning expert. It's my island.

That's it, exactly. And people can be very defensive this way. And the illustration I'm most likely to cite is this.

Many years ago, I had the ambition, after I'd finished the work, the initial work on the dissertation, I had the ambition of writing a biography of Edwards. And I was told very plainly by a senior Edwards scholar that no, I should not do that because he was planning to do it, and would I please buzz off. [laughter] I looked at that and I thought, "Alright, maybe I should look at something else to do." Which probably was another influencing stream at Turning to Lincoln.

You might look at that and say, "Well, isn't that a very difficult experience?" Well, certainly, you don't like to feel that a senior scholar and a senior expert is kind of putting his foot down on you. But on the other hand, can I complain about the direction that that eventually pushed me? Certainly not. So I have no condemnation, criticism, complaint, and in fact, applaud that particular person for a very fine biography they did write of Jonathan Edwards.

And as an Adwardsian, and even as a Linconian, you can recognize the hand of Providence. Exactly. I mentioned in that new introduction.

This old Scottish proverb that God writes straight on crooked lines. Yeah. And I have found that to be true, not just in one instance, but in many, many instances.

One other just tidbit before we get into Lincoln, but you mentioned in the preface that the first edition, you dedicated to Jack Kemp, who you believe would have been one of the great presidents. Tell us about that. You had a relationship with Jack Kemp? I got to know Jack Kemp in the 1990s, early in the 90s.

He had a very lively interest in American history in Lincoln. Curiously enough in Ulysses Grant, too. And I got to know Kemp.

I met him in Philadelphia. The very first thing we talked about was Lincoln. And every time I would be in Washington, I would make a point to go over and visit Jack at his office.

And we would just sit there and we would talk history shop. Yeah. It probably appreciated not talking politics.

I really think so. When he was nominated for the Vice Presidency in 1996, part of me wondered, is this really where he should go? I really, really loved seeing him at the top of a ticket. And I think that he was a man of depth.

I think he was a man of compassion, a man of intelligence. I think he would have made a great president. I was sorry that that did not happen.

But I greatly came to admire Jack Kemp and was happy to dedicate the book to him. That's fascinating. So we'll talk about someone who was president, Abraham Lincoln.

Why do you think there is such a continuing, maybe even growing? Why has there always been such a fascination and interest in Lincoln? I've heard it said, I don't know if this is true or not, but I remember hearing it said, that next to Jesus, there are more books written each year about Abraham Lincoln than about anybody else. I can't confirm that. Maybe you can.

But why the persistent fascination? What is it about Lincoln that so many people still want to study, read, write? When you might think, there's nothing new to say about this man. I think there are several reasons, Kevin. One of them is that Lincoln guides the nation as president through what is still, looking back on it from 160 years.

The greatest crisis we ever faced as a republic, we don't often understand just how perilous the moment was. People will agree it was a serious moment. It was a challenging moment.

But the truth is, it actually was much worse than we imagine it. In 1861, when he is inaugurated, the United States is coming apart of the seams. It's not just divided, it's not just polarized.

An entire section of the country had decided to detach itself. And looked at geographically, there was enough coherence there to form an independent nation state. And they very much could have won.

They could have won. They could have won. And not only that, but if they had won, think of what that would have done to the very promise of democratic government itself.

In 1776, we looked, we Americans looked like we were on the very edge of a new era. I mean, Tom Payne says we have the power to make the world over again. Yeah, well,

that lasted for a very short time.

In 1789, the French decide to have a revolution, largely inspired by ours, and look what a botch that turns into. And from there, you go to the revolutions of 1848, they fail. At every point up until 1861, this whole notion of the promise of democratic government, just shrinks and shrinks and shrinks.

Until by 1861, the United States is really the only large-scale democracy functioning in the world. And here in 1861, we're blaging all the monarchs and dukes and counts and dictators by blowing our own brains out in a civil war. If we had botched that, that would have been prima-fauci evidence.

Democracy does not work. Ordinary people cannot govern themselves. They just can't do it.

They need someone booted and spurred riding their backs to make, to ensure order. And Lincoln understands that. I mean, Lincoln says in 1861, the real fundamental issue at stake here in this Civil War is, are people capable of governing their own affairs? He sees us through that crisis, that challenge, and we emerge on the other side of it substantially stronger in our understanding of ourselves as a democratic people.

So we understand Lincoln having played a central role, not only in the leadership, and in the way he articulated it as well, because he could translate these ideas into language that people understood. I mean, look, he was a trial lawyer. His 25 years of his life had been devoted to persuading juries.

So in a sense, the American people became the jury he was appealing to, and he knew how to persuade them. And he does that over and over again of what he writes and what he says. But he becomes this hinge figure in the survival of American democratic government.

So that's one thing. A second thing is how utterly unlikely it was that he could have pulled that off. I mean, in 1861, who is Abraham Lincoln? The campaign posters can't even get his name right.

The campaign posters are advertising him as Abram Lincoln. They're going back to earlier in Genesis before the name changed. Exactly.

They don't know who he is. They have some inkling that he engaged in these contentious debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858. But he's a dark horse candidate of all the dark horse candidates.

And suddenly he's running for president, and he gets elected because the northern states have more electoral vote heft. He's so little known that one newspaper editor asks out loud, who will write this ignorant man's state papers for him? And people



underestimated him. I mean, they looked at him and he just looked funny.

I mean, Kevin, we're used to what, yeah, exactly. We're used to what Lincoln looked like because he's on the \$5 bill, because the portraits. All right, we're not surprised.

We're not shocked by that. He's in a huge statue in Washington, D.C. Larger than life. Exactly.

But in 1861, people looked at the six foot four inch man, shambling, awkward, strangely put together. When he stood up, here's an example. If he was sitting down, he would look to be about the same proportions as you and I. All right? All of his height was in his legs, which meant that when he stood up, it was like watching a jackknife unfold.

It was just awkward, awkward, awkward. He looked homely. He had this high pitched voice with this border state accent that he could cut with a knife.

He sounded like Jeff Foxworthy. And people listened to that and they say, "Where did they get this robe from?" And you know what that did? That... They underestimated him. Exactly.

He used that. Time it again. I think the wisest thing that was ever said about Lincoln was a comment made by one of his old time legal associates out on the 8th Judicial Circuit in Illinois.

It was Leonard Sweatt. And Leonard Sweatt said that anyone who took Abraham Lincoln for a simple minded man would soon wake up with his back in a ditch. And oh, how true, how true that turned out to be.

So we admire that in Lincoln. We admire his resilience. We admire his humility.

We admire his moral steadfastness in what he saw as his purpose. Take all those things together. And he's probably the most remarkable of all American presidents.

Even, I would have to say, perhaps even more remarkable than George Washington, because at least George Washington looked the part. That's true. He did look the part.

And it's really well said that we're so used to it. We see him on the \$5 bill. We see him in DC.

And it's all just part of the myth of Lincoln, but it would have seemed strange. I don't know if you've heard this old comedy bit from decades ago from Bob Newhart where he does Madison Avenue talking to Abraham Lincoln, and they're sort of giving him advice. And it's a Madison Avenue executive saying, "Now Abe, Abe, can you wear the shawl? No, don't you see how it helps you?" And the top hat, don't you know, that's part of the... Abe, why you gotta say 87 years? Don't you know that four score and seven years? That's what we call a grabber.

So we're so used to all of these things about Lincoln that we can fail to realize. Yes, he would have looked strange and they don't have access. They don't have smartphones that they are inundated with pictures.

And it's just here in a newspaper here or there or a sketch, just as gangly fellow. What are the... You know, some of the myths. Tell me if these are true or false.

So one of them is honest Abe, rail splitter, and self-taught man. And then you can even sort of spin that out. He was a failure in everything until he finally was elected president.

There's some truth and error in all of that. Give us the fact from fiction and that kind of myth of Abraham Lincoln. Well, I want to hesitate to use the word "mouth" because in some senses, all of those things were true.

He was self-educated for the most part. Growing up as he did in southern Indiana in the early decades of the 19th century, there really wasn't a whole lot in the way of educational opportunity. He might have had as much as six months of consecutive schooling.

Although on the other hand, there wasn't a whole lot more than that available to other people. So while it's limited from our perspective, painfully limited, it actually was not entirely that far from the rule in his own day. What he often said he felt most embarrassed by was a lack of college education.

Although in some respects his longtime law partner, William Herndon, said if he had had a college education, it probably would have ruined him. But he notwithstanding the limitations on formal education, he had a voracious intellectual appetite. He read whatever he could lay his hands on, and along with that he had a remarkable memory, not the photographic memory, literally, but an extremely good memory so that what he read stuck with him.

And he would be able to bring up citations to things, poetry, Shakespeare, philosophy, years, months, weeks after having encountered them for the first time. So yeah, part of the myth is actually not a myth at all. It was a limited education.

But at the same time, don't lose sight of the fact that here was a person whose intellectual curiosity was deep and profound, a man for whom ideas, for books, for writing were extremely important. These are the same kind of things you can say about almost all of the Lincoln myths. Was he honest? Yes, he was.

If anything, it was his... Let's call it his religious default, because growing up he departs from the Calvinist orthodoxy of his parents. How does he make up for that? Where does he find a moral compass? He has to invent it somewhere. And if it can't be religion explicitly, it's got to be something else.

And for him, honesty is that substitute. In that respect, honesty almost becomes a religion for Lincoln. So yes, he is honest, Abe.

There were moments when he sometimes pushed the envelope a little bit. There was a divorce case he was involved in in Illinois. The divorce case had gone badly.

The husband died and the woman was accused of murdering him. At a break in the trial, she said to him that she'd like a glass of water. His response was, "There are mighty fine glasses of water in Tennessee when the court reassembled, she was gone." Oh.

So he didn't exactly tell an untruth, but he was a shrewd lawyer. He was, as Herndon used the word, "long-headed." And this is true. And yet, Herndon also said that Lincoln's sense of decency and honor prevented him from yielding to the kinds of temptations that many other lawyers in his day did yield to.

And Herndon admired that tremendously in Lincoln. Let's talk about, because the book is called Redeemer President, which is a fitting title and an ironic title. And to a large degree, as you said at the beginning, it's a biography, a traditional biography in some ways, an intellectual biography more narrowly, and then drawing out this religious dimension.

And so he've already hinted at it. He grew up in a rigid Calvinistic home, perhaps even fatalistic at times, which is not what I would want to own as genuine Calvinism. But he grew up in an originally Calvinistic home.

And yet, was it Herndon who described him at one point as enthusiastically irreligious? I mean, what happened, give us his upbringing, and then what happened that by the time he's running for public office, he has to find a way to downplay his non-Christianity in order to be palatable to a wig. A wig sort of constituency. Lincoln's parents were separate Baptists, which means they were Calvinist Baptists.

And usually the way people treat this is to immediately introduce the word rigid, as though rigid and Calvinist were synonyms, or at least belong in the same sentence together. I don't know about you, but the most rigid people I have known for their rigidity have usually been atheists. But, all right, we'll leave right now.

I've met a lot of very flexible, very pleasant Calvinists. You're here. I'm shy of using the adjectives like stark and rigid like that because it conjures up all the number of unfortunate images.

If anything, I remember there was a very famous biography of Lincoln that was published in the 1990s, which began by saying that Lincoln really didn't believe in free will, and therefore he was an entirely passive personality. And I thought, no, no, that's a very shallow understanding of predestination. Predestination does not induce passivity.

Predestination is what releases you from passivity because if you believe that your will is the only thing that operates in the universe, then the odds of the universe against you are forbidding. They're almost infinite. It's knowing that there is a divine decree which orders everything, including our path, is what relieves you from feeling helpless.

It's what empowers people. And I found that this, in fact, was very much the case with Lincoln, except that Lincoln embraces a kind of denatured Calvinism. And what I mean by that is he grows up in a Calvinist household.

And yet in his adolescence, he rebels against it. In some respects, you might say he's kind of the typical teenager. There's some reasons for it.

He loses his birth mother when he is just eight years old. His stepmother actually is something of an inversion of the usual brother's grim image of his stepmother. He adored his stepmother, Sarah Bush, Johnston, Lincoln.

And she, him, the two formed an extraordinarily close bond. But he didn't have anything like that bond with his father, Thomas Lincoln. And Thomas Lincoln and his son Abraham were just on totally different wavelengths.

And you can begin to understand Lincoln's sense of pulling away. He found his father something of an embarrassment. He once described his father as being marginally literate, capable of bunglingly signing his own name.

That's not a compliment. And his relationship with his father is just not a very, very good one. Lincoln pulls away from his parents' religion.

And as a 20-something, he's actually got something of a reputation. A cocky reputation is sneering at religion, writing little essays, denouncing the New Testament, sneering at Jesus. That begins to change as he marries, becomes a professional.

It changes for two reasons. One is if he's going to enter into political life, he can't afford it. He can't ask what is still an overwhelmingly Protestant and evangelical culture to vote for him that way.

The other thing is that life deals him a number of blows. His second son dies before age four. There are crises he has to cope with.

And he only begins to cope with him by trying to grapple his way back to some kind of understanding of a God who gives some kind of shape to events and to the world. He never quite gets there. And in a sense, it's that ancestral Calvinism which almost holds him back.

He made a comment to the mother of one of his legal proteges at one point. And he said to her that he was probably condemned to go on searching in the darkness like directing

Thomas. And what that suggested to me was that Lincoln believed firmly enough in predestination that he didn't believe that he could make a choice himself.

That he was waiting for God to do something, to cure his unbelief. And he believed he had to be doing it that way. And that of course did not happen for him.

He never joined a church. He was never baptized. He never took communion.

Went through none of these things. His church attendance was spotty and formal at best. So there's really no evidence he ever made any kind of serious Christian profession.

And yet, and yet. As he moves into the presidency and into this crisis of the Civil War, he's kind of trying to find some understanding of why it's happening the way it's happening. Why is the American experiment self-destructing? Why is the Confederacy winning? Why are his generals losing? And refusing to fight.

In some cases, actually talking about overthrowing him and establishing a dictatorship. So he has to try to understand this. And he sits down in 1862, tries to lay this out almost like it's a geometrical pattern.

He has to start up by saying, "Alright, God is in charge of everything. If he isn't, he wouldn't be God." And from there, he says, "If God really wanted to end this war quickly, he would have done so by now." But obviously, he has not wanted the war to end quickly because it hasn't ended quickly. Therefore, God must have some purpose in this war.

That none of us at the beginning discerned. What could that purpose be? Well, he leaves the answer blank, but it doesn't take a lot of imagination to figure out what he was filling in, and that's emancipation. And he will come back to this idea on several occasions.

What's going on in the Civil War is not his design. He makes a comment at one time, George Stewart, who was the chair of the Christian Commission, visited Lincoln in the White House, and he complimented Lincoln. You've done very well in guiding the country to the ending of slavery.

And Lincoln said, "No, no, no. I don't deserve any credit for this." In fact, you don't deserve any credit for it either, because if it hadn't been for those people across the river, and he points southwards out the window of the White House, if it hadn't been for those people across the river, we would never have been able to do any of this. So he's seeing this moving direction.

He's trying to discern this, and it reaches this climax in the second inaugural address on the 4th of March, 1865, in which he talks about the will of God and the nature of God, and God is a judge in a way that no president before or since has ever been able to do. And it's curious, you'll appreciate this, Kevin. Shortly before Lincoln delivers the second

inaugural, Charles Hodge.

Yeah, Charles Hodge makes some important appearances in the biography. Charles Hodge wrote an essay early in 1865 about the will of God in this war. What is God's purpose in this war? Which has some unusual parallels to the conclusions that Lincoln wants people to come to in the second inaugural.

I can't say that Lincoln is actually reading Charles Hodge, because there's no quotation in any direct way. And yet these are both people who have been shaped by old school Calvinist Presbyterianism. So maybe it's not a surprise that moving in a parallel road, they're coming to some parallel conclusions.

But what does Lincoln say in the second inaugural accept that we understand that God brought this war upon us? Nobody can say, oh no, it happened as an accident. No, this war came upon us. It is a judgment, and God is judging us north and south.

Right. His second inaugural is not a victory lap. It's not, hey, we're the good guys.

We beat the bad guys. God is on our side. No, he says none of us were on God's side.

Yeah, it's fascinating. Here's what you say, 408. This, of course, referring to this view of the war and providence had been Charles Hodge's argument two years before, and it is no accident that Lincoln, the predestinarian Baptist by background and mechanist, and Hodge, the old school wig press material, and had tracked each other's intellectual positions with some surprising degree.

Where the two parted, you say, was that Lincoln looked upon this inscrutable God purely as judge, and a judge so remote that his most crucial decisions could only be unfathomable. There was no hint in the inaugural that the terrible bloodletting could in some way reflect a redemptive purpose, that God, the judge, might also be perceived as God the Redeemer. That's what makes your title so appropriate and ironic at the same time, and where I think you're arguing Hodge and Lincoln, whether there was any indebtedness, probably not, but certainly the same intellectual milieu, that Hodge, an Orthodox Christian and Presbyterian, could foresee a redemptive purpose, where Lincoln, did he ever countenance a redemptive purpose in it all? If he did, he never spoke of it in those terms.

The second inaugural, the second inaugural is about God the judge, and because God is judging both north and south, what is the response we are to have? Our response is to be the response of humility, of repentance, of showing malice toward none, and charity for all. People quote those words of Lincoln about malice and charity, as though it was a slogan for a hallmark greeting card. Right, about a sticker.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But it's not. It is a very hard one realization, a hard one realization that comes from the fact that you begin to realize that you stand under the judgment of God,

that God laughs at the pretensions of human beings, but he doesn't laugh in a hostile fashion.

There's a sympathy in the laughter. And what that does is to make us realize that our relationships with each other have to be lived under the realization of God's rule over all of us. And it's precisely that which leads us not to show malice, which leads us to show charity.

It's a very hard one realization. It's a realization that requires humility, repentance, to a certain degree, even commiseration. But it's for Lincoln.

It's the only way forward because he understood that among the many things which are the enemies of democracy, vengeance. Vengeance can rot out the insides of democracy as effectively as any other toxic substance. You want to follow up on that in just a moment.

Just to mention, there's no good segue here, but desiring God, also a sponsor of LBE, their Ask Pastor John podcast three times a week. John Piper answers theological pastoral questions. So I suppose the segue is here.

We're talking about difficult theological questions. And although Piper may not talk about the Civil War, over 1,800 episodes questions, so check that out to ask Pastor John. So here's my segue to think about this in an academic, and maybe even a pastoral sense, to play counterfactual for a moment.

Of course, Lincoln doesn't live to see very much of his second term. He doesn't live to see reconstruction. You've written a very fine book that goes into civil war and also reconstruction.

It's speculation we recognize, but would things have been different? How different would have reconstruction been if Lincoln were at the helm? Would it have set our country on a different trajectory for 100 years? Would we still have had the Klan and Jim Crow? And no one can know this, but God. But how do you think, as a historian, what difference it made, or was it perhaps even as a theologian, you might say the judgment of God, that Lincoln had to pass on from this life in the way that he did? Historians like to think of themselves as steel-eyed rocket scientists. We're just dealing with the facts.

And as soon as we start venturing into what ifs, it gets very marshy and swampy. But Kevin, there's no question I'm asked more often than, what would it have been like if Lincoln had lived? Well, I think one thing you can say is it wouldn't have been worse than what we actually got. It would have been worse.

That's true. I mean, Andrew Johnson, as his successor, I'm sorry, he's right down there at the bottom of the list of presidents. It couldn't have been worse than that.

But could it have been significantly better? That's a more difficult question to answer. I think there are some things that would have been better that Lincoln would have seen through. I think that Lincoln certainly would have been committed right from the start to equality in terms of civil privileges, voting rights, probably the full run of what we would today call civil rights.

He was already trending in that direction in the last year of his life. The very last speech he gives is a signal on going for voting rights for the freed slaves, at least for some of them. I can only see that the arc of that moving forward still further.

I think he probably would have also seen the importance of economic empowerment for the freed slaves. He was very protective of those freed slaves who would already set themselves up economically in union occupied areas of the south. I think that is a trend that would have continued.

But beyond that, it is hard to speculate because for one thing, he would only have had three more years of his second term. That's not a whole lot in which to pull off a reconstruction. He would also have had to have dealt with the fact that the country had spent itself very, very deeply into the whole.

And there was a tremendous pressure to demobilize the armies once the war was over, send the union soldiers back to their homes because they weren't professional soldiers, they were volunteers. Well, we are going to use them to keep the south in line. Ulysses Grant, years later, speculated that the great mistake that they made was that they didn't establish a military occupation over the old Confederacy for some 30 years afterwards, so that it would be an opportunity for an entirely new political generation to grow up.

Well, that didn't happen, and it would have been very difficult to imagine how it could have happened given the financial constraints that the country was operating under. And then within that framework, how much political capital does Lincoln actually have to spend in terms of the southern governments that were going to emerge in reconstruction? That is almost impossible to estimate. And yet, we keep coming back to this if Lincoln had lived.

And to a certain degree, Lincoln himself almost comes to that conclusion because he says in the last weeks of his life, he says to a New Jersey political figure, James Skovill, he says, "With the war being over now, everything is going to be different in this country. It's going to blossom. The economy is going to take off.

We are going to live in the valley of Jehosephat." And he really believed there was a great time coming for America once the war was over. He did not live to see it, but maybe it would have been different. Maybe we would have, as he once said, maybe we would have had the time, maybe we would have the breathing room to move ourselves out of the old relationship and into a new one.



And he says they are thinking especially about race, but it did not happen. And you point out, of course, this is an interest to me as a Presbyterian. And now for the last six years, a Presbyterian in the south, you point out at the end that even men like Thornwell, of course, who died before the Civil War had really gotten under way, and was a unionist up until the very end, until the Confederacy is birthed, expressed disapproval with slavery.

Of course, you can go back and read plenty of things from Thornwell that we find embarrassing today for all of his theological brilliance. And yet, even Thornwell, a defender of the south, did see enough to say this slavery, which even he was defending, was an aspect of the fall. He did not give a positive good defense.

As some did, he said, "This was not an Eden. This will not be in heaven. But it's the ordering of mankind here on earth for a time, and the Bible doesn't fully prohibit it." And so he says things which all Southern Presbyterians now have to rightly distance themselves from, for whatever else he got right.

How prevalent do you think that view was? And did Lincoln, I mean, if he didn't read Hodge, he probably wasn't reading Thornwell, but did he have a sense of even the differences of shades within the Confederacy itself on how to view these issues? Oh, he did. And I think he read more of the theologians than we sometimes surmise. He was able to quote one Presbyterian who unfortunately was offering a much more long-toothed version of defending slavery as a positive good.

And he sharply, sharply criticized that theologian's writing. So he was reading a good deal of men. Who knows? Maybe he crossed tracks with our friends Hodge and Thornwell at some point.

It's just impossible to say. But he is aware of the shades of opinion, and there were shades of opinion. One thing that is interesting, for instance, about Robert E. Lee, is that Lee was not a pro-slavery partisan.

Lee in 1856 writes a letter to his wife. He says, "Slavery is a moral and a political evil in any country." But then he does something that almost all these Southerners like Thornwell and Lee did, and that was to say, "But we can't do anything about it now." Right. Now, we look at that.

We look at Thornwell. We look at Lee. We look at people like that in the South, and we say, "They knew what was right.

Why didn't they do it?" For the same reason that so many of us know what is right and don't do it. Think of it in this respect. I put this as a proposition to a student of mine one time.

Suppose, Kevin, you were the heir of a great plantation. Your mother was dead. Your father just died.

You've just inherited a plantation in South Carolina that has, let's say, 50 slaves as part of the property. The day that you inherit that property, you, as a righteous-minded biblical scholar, look at slavery and you say, "The slavery is being practiced here in the South. It is not what is described in the Old Testament.

It's a totally different system. Let's not try to fool ourselves." The slavery we're practicing here in the South is wrong. All right.

The day after your father dies and you become the heir of this plantation, you get visited by your neighbors. And they say, "Kevin, we understand that you have some very curious thoughts on this subject of slavery. We would like you to know that we know that you have these thoughts." Now, what tremor does that send through you? So are you going to immediately rush out and say, "Well, I guess I'll emancipate all the slaves on my property? That might not be so easy.

Your neighbors might not make it so easy. They might not make it easy for you and they might not make it easy for the slaves on the plantation either." What do you do? Suddenly, you find yourself in a very tight position. And at that moment, it becomes easy, whether it's Kevin or whether it's Alan or anyone else.

It's very easy to say, "All right, we'll go along with this for a while and we'll just see how it develops." Right. And that's how slavery kept a purchase on life. Right.

And even if you've come to the right moral convictions, it takes a great deal of further moral courage not to mention hard work and risk to do something. It's not to excuse them. It's just to try to understand how we are as human beings.

And we can wish that they would have put themselves in the shoes of their slaves to risk something for their sake. And to add to the layer, again, it's not excusing. Just try to just understand the human dynamic.

Add to the layer when you feel like you know that the people that there's people out there, the North, certainly the abolition, whether this is a right perception or not, they hate us and they hate everything we're about. And the last thing you want to do when somebody hates you and what you're about is give them the satisfaction of thinking that they're right. Again, not an excuse at all.

It's just trying to understand and perhaps find some contemporary residents, residents with all of us when we deal with polarizing issues and just the way the human spirit works. Yes, it is. It is easy over the distance of 16 decades to say, oh, we would have done different.

It would have been an easy decision. Oh, perhaps it would have been. If you're so good, I congratulate people who can make easy decisions at 16 decades distance.

What about the issues that surround us today and how willing are we to risk the disapproval of our neighbors, our culture on the issues that we know where Christianity tells us we should be, but how often do we hedge? We do. We know that we do. Before we rush to a quick judgment, I don't say that we shouldn't rush to a judgment.

We have to. But before we rush to a quick judgment, let's also examine ourselves and understand the position that we are in. So let's come back full circle, very well said to Lincoln.

People from the very beginning, after his death, of course, it's on the one hand shot on Good Friday. It's hard not to make. He's the martyr.

He's the Jesus figure. And yet many people also notice, well, what was he doing in a theater on Good Friday? This is a bit of an embarrassment. He was in a godless place, some farcical play on Good Friday.

But people want to make him out to be a Christian. You talk about this even one pastor who said, well, he for years would tell me that he was, he had come to understand that Jesus was the Son of God and he had made this profession of faith, all of which things people were very eager to believe. So you say Holland took up testimony from Newton Bateman that in 1860, Lincoln had confessed to Bateman, quote, I know there is a God.

He hates injustice and slavery. Noah Brooks told a congregational clergyman, Isaac Langworthy, for myself, I'm glad to say I have a firm belief in Mr. Lincoln's saving knowledge of Christ. He talked always of Christ.

His cross as a tome. He prayed regularly, cast all his cares on God. Oh, as a Christian, I want to believe that's true, but Alan, you're telling us not much evidence that that's the case.

I want to believe it too for exactly the same reason, Kevin, but I can't because I have to look at the record and the evidence. And as much as lies within me, I have to tell the truth. I have to stand before King David as Nathan did, and I have to say, thou art the man.

I don't have an alternative. Right. I mean, I've often thought very simply as a historian, which I'm not a real historian as you do this historical work, but I think if nothing else, a historian, let alone one who is a Christian, is to try to tell the truth.

I'll understand that sounds hopelessly simplistic, and there's all sorts of Marxist readings and feminist readings. And how can you ever know the truth? Well, of course, we recognize we see through a glass dimly. And yet the goal of the historian is to say, as best as we can, I'm trying to understand what this man was like, or woman, why he or she did what he did, and to give an accurate representation of it.

How do we meet these people sometime beyond the grave that they might say, yeah, you tried to give me a fair shake. And maybe we understand something better about themselves than they did. That's possible.

We are sometimes blind to our own idiosyncrasies or what makes us tick. But to tell the truth, to tell the truth when it serves a purpose we like, or when it serves a purpose that, or it doesn't serve the purpose that we like. Let me ask this as a final question, just bringing it to a contemporary valence.

Is it even possible to have a president, or if not a president, just a prominent political leader, anything like Lincoln? Now that's an unfair question to take what most people consider the best or one of the top three, five presidents. So the very nature of an exceptional man is that they're exceptional, and we shouldn't expect them to be common. And yet you can't help but ask the question, does our world today, does American the 21st century, is it capable of producing someone like Lincoln, or maybe even more on the nose? Would it tolerate? Would it listen to someone? Is an Abraham Lincoln public figure even possible in America today? Well, bear in mind, it took him a long time in the presidency to persuade people to listen to him.

Also bear in mind how utterly unpredictable Lincoln was. Look at the run of presidents before him. They were a pretty, pretty poor collection.

Is it possible today? I sometimes wonder. I have a very good friend who would, I think, be an excellent Supreme Court justice. But he said quite frankly, I would never go through the process because I couldn't put my family through what they'd have to be put through through the nomination.

So we discourage really good people from public life this way. On the other hand, was it really all that much different in Lincoln's day? Possibly not. Possibly not.

We could not predict Otto von Bismarck, who I'm not in the habit of quoting. Bismarck once said, "The Lord watches out for fools, drunks, and the United States of America." Well said. And sometimes we're all three.

And Kevin, if there was ever empirical confirmation of that dictum, Abraham Lincoln is it. So very last question to speak. Perhaps a Christian word to Christians that are listening to this is not all Christians, but even if Abraham Lincoln wasn't the Christian, we would want him to have been from all that we can tell.

He grasped in a way that few Calvinists even fully embrace the contours of God's providence. And it seems to me that in a day where many Christians, understandably so, are fearful, are anxious, see even civilization, they fear crumbling around them. What sort of word are we or what sort of encouragement are we to take, if not from Abraham Lincoln, and simply from the confidence and providence that Abraham Lincoln had,

perhaps even putting to shame those of us who have a much more robust, deep faith in God than Lincoln did.

I think that Lincoln conveys to us two words, weight and hope. And both of those words are not simply Calvinist. I think they are also Christian.

They are theistic, at the most fundamental level, weight and hope. Final, final good words, weight and hope. So I just want to mention again, here it is, Abraham Lincoln, redeemer president.

Thank you Dr. Gelso, fantastic scholar and even just as much an excellent writer. There are lots of smart people out there who cannot write well, believe me, I know. So when you get a smart person who can write well, read their books.

Thank you so much. Hope to have you on with one of your future projects and the Lord bless you and all your endeavors. And for all of our listeners, until next time, glorify God, enjoy him forever and read a good book.

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